

Another Love Story

“What is love?

A mere construct of emotion and passion

Or a definition of our very existence?”

Vanessa was cute, I guess, but her smile arrested my heart, that
Dopey smile....

How could I forget the hook that reeled me in,

You always know what seals your fate, that dawning moment.

For me, it was that dopey smile, her lips dilated and moved against the jaw bone to reveal a perfect set of dental soldiers, arranged naturally like in a parade. I called it dopey because it was reminiscent of the look of a drug addict on ecstasy.

Maybe it was how her dimples were highlighted and etched in perfection over smooth, light brown skin with a random sprinkle of freckles.

How I wish it were all that superficial glory.

I've always been moved by the broken, the supposed scarred things of life. I found a secret joy in fixing things, and from the first day that smile beamed at me with a dark light.

That smile that felt incomplete yet real, like an imitation of the real thing, I knew then I must fix her.

"Never mind, I'll find someone like you" The famous line from the 2011 song by the G.O.A.T (Adele), sang with an F sharp (how I know that is beyond me), full of emotion, jolted me out of bed this morning.

I peeked through my window towards where it came from, and there she was.

Lost in the song, with eyes closed and upward, lungs full of emotions, pain in every note as if she had been through every lyric.

She sang with so much passion it made up for what she lacked in talent.

I wanted to caution her for interrupting my sleep, but something held me back.

I watched for a while, capturing this creature in her natural habitat. Until realization dawned on me, I was staring.

“Hey,” I said with annoyance laced in my voice, looking out the window in time to see her almost fall as she struggled to pinpoint my location...

And even at that moment, she smiled again (that dopey smile), as if she knew me and I don't mean by my name ... “I'm sorry did I wake you” she said in a tone that seemed like she was happy to see me.

“**Skrrhhhh**” Just as I was about to pour out my heart, I heard my parents' door slide open, and I wasn't waiting to find out who came out.

Rushing to my bed, I kept thinking, “Why am I smiling so much”.

Days turned to weeks, and we would speak in passing, merely sharing banter, cracking jokes, night strolls, exchange of numbers; I didn't know yet, but I was falling.

The thing with feelings is you don't even realize they're there till it becomes apparent, like a tap dripping till it fills an ocean.

It starts with the little things; you start to stutter within conversations despite your literacy level.

All sense of logic dims on matters concerning her, and your face defaults settings are all smiles upon seeing her. The slight contact of your skin sets your body in vibration mode. The heart starts playing a different rhythm when she roams the halls of your mind. The pitch of

her voice, what it represents, and its matching facial expression are imprinted in your prefrontal cortex.

Slowly but surely, you lose your identity.

Then you start picking up little facts. Vanessa snorts a little when she laughs and her nose quivered when she was nervous, how she avoided your eyes when the moment was too intense.

She was born on Valentine's Day (Talk about a sign from God).

Her favourite color was black, and she loved jewellery. She disliked fruits aside from Mangoes; her favorite food was rice, plantain, and beans.

Vanessa enjoyed singing; it served as a means of escape from reality. She could be shy and seemed introverted but enjoyed making friends

She had an unstable sense of humour, with one end being extremely childish and the other surprisingly dark.

Then things got a little deeper,

I could sense the consistent shift in her moods, and like a stabilizer, I would balance it.

I started to see the similarities in our personas; we both hid behind the comedy, suddenly cracking a joke to elude questions too personal to bear.

I got a sense of why she had cracks in her smile. She was only 17, born the first child of four, with the others too far behind. She shouldered too many responsibilities for her age.

“I grew up too fast”, she would always whisper, merely existing and not living.

Craving freedom, she created fantasies in her head of her independence from the chains of family.

For a girl of her appearance, she had an esteem so close to the ground; it seemed heavy. She would shudder when I called her beautiful.

I caught her staring again today; her eyes seemed so calm with a hint of danger, like a caged animal daring you to set her free.

Often, she would stare into space like that, only to be disturbed by her mother screaming her name for the tenth time today. Then she would scurry off, cursing under her breath.

“**Bang, Bang**” I heard someone drop something metallic. I looked out the terrace into my backyard. Vanessa struggled to move what appeared to be most of the dishes in her house.

It was 4:30 on the clock, and my parents had stepped out, so I sneaked downstairs, careful not to wake my sleeping siblings. Speed walking to the backyard, only slowing down when I saw her diligently setting the plates in the basin to wash.

Quietly I walked to her back, covered her eyes, and said, “guess who” (I know, cliché move, right?). She moved her arms down my arms for what seemed like forever; my body shook with each touch, and then, with joy, she screamed, “Courage” (Yes, my name was courage).

Funny how I wouldn’t say I liked that name; I instead preferred my first name.

However, how she pronounced it, emphasizing each vowel, had an enchanting effect that made me smile from ear to ear.

I removed my hands and moved to sit beside her, rolling up my sleeves to assist her (cause mama raised a husband material).

We talked at length; I spoke, she laughed, the vibe was intoxicating, everything fading into obscurity.

She would listen to my stories, giving you her full attention and seeing the root behind your stories

You could see the embers within her eyes light up as she gave a childish grin.

She complained about her dad a lot, I hadn't met her dad, but I hated him already.

I found him very lazy; he would stay home all day doing nothing while she and her mom toiled daily to run the house.

Sympathizing with her, I retorted, "You do so much for a girl your age" (Like I knew what that meant).

Returning home, I made a vow to God and all the angels that watch me. Tomorrow would be the day I would tell her how I felt.

As if the universe had heard me and challenged me to a duel. Watching for her in my tower of a house throughout the day. she failed to come out, and when she did, she wasn't alone.

I muttered the challenge accepted and reached out for the greatest invention since sliced bread: My mobile phone.

It was six o'clock sharp.

I typed the most challenging sentence of my life "**Vanessa, I think I like you**". Pressing send was like pushing the detonator for an atomic bomb, pacing the room while thinking out loud about how it could all go wrong. If this went wrong, I would have to move out cause God knows I'm living here no more.

With all the courage in my name, I pressed it and waited. Seconds seemed like days and minutes like weeks. I locked my phone, placed it down, unlocked it, and closed it again.

Then a notification came in, rushing to my phone so fast, Flash would be shocked. I picked it up only to see the battery low; how could I make such a mistake? Five minutes later, my phone was dead, and I was moping on the floor.

Thirty minutes later, I traded my last card (Money) for my annoying brother's power bank.

My phone couldn't come on faster, and time seemed to crawl.

I was dying from anticipation when the message from my angel came in.

I recall humming "Joy like a river" and zooming into my message app.

There it was, written in bold text, **"it's stupid courage, but I like you too"....**

The following days were bliss. Living in the same compound was one of the things I was grateful for, in my newfound relationship with Vanessa

I would wake up every day with a smile as I raced downstairs to her flat to receive my morning wages in hugs. Now I understand why salary earners were so happy at the end of the month.

I normally couldn't wake up by 7, but here I was at 6:00 sharp, whispering at her window, careful not to wake the whole house up.

It was forbidden love already. Our parents hated each other, mine being the landlord and hers, the tenant who never paid on time. I would always strongly advise my father not to evict them — whispering the message of compassion ever so lightly.

We communicated a lot with body language, smirks, flickers of the eye, and shortcodes, trying to be indifferent in public (we can't have them calling a compound meeting on our head).

She used an inferior mobile device that couldn't use current social media apps,

So, we switched to text messages, with each message costing 4 Naira; you poured all you had to say into each text.

My siblings always wondered why my credit finished early,

Maybe love does cost a thing after all.

I was a blooming writer at the time, having a few words to my name, but she loved my drafts, praising my work as the best she had seen; she would point out the hidden messages trying to understand the writer's mindset.

I wrote something for you today," she had strung words together, and as I read, my heart skipped a beat; it was beautiful. She was falling, and I was already on the floor.

My writing found new depth, my muse. I would spend days in a trance with her image and pour it into my craft

Joy and excitement filled my heart as I raced to present it to her. I anticipated every pigment of blush on her cheek. The dilation of her pupils and the smile on her lips as she turned to me. "Is this me!!! ",

yes, I replied, shaking in my boots

"I love it", she replied...

She would come up to see me when our parents were away, knocking thrice in rapid succession for some reason. My siblings loved her,

especially my sister; in her words,” she looked like a young Genevieve”. I guess that’s all it took to like someone these days.

How can one person have such an effect on my mood? I found myself pacing the compound in an attempt to look busy so that I could catch a glimpse of her,

My brothers started to notice the delayed glances, secret laughs, inside jokes, and my absence from the house.

I was always downstairs, smiling when I heard her name, and spent most days living another life in my mind; then, like a reality check, my school announced the resumption of school activities by the following week.

Betrayed by education, “last last school na scam”, more valid words have not been said.

Haunted by a timeline, every moment was more intense than the last, like approaching a musical crescendo.

Steadily we approached the night before my departure, tears streaming from the eyes of our heroine. I stood there poised while consoling her, like an experienced actor from a movie: ho her face and staring into her eyes, the air tense, as bodies hummed in expectation. She closed her eyes in anticipation, nose quivering in nervousness.

I said a quick mental prayer of thanksgiving to God for this moment.

She kissed me in the middle of my prayer; I couldn't count how long it was; my brain was on hiatus.

All I can remember is the feeling, as lips collided, time stopped.

There was a stillness in the air and silence everywhere; no chirps of crickets or croaks of frogs. It was as if the universe waited till our lips parted and fresh air filled our lungs.

Silence filled our mouths, but we understood, at that moment, it was just us.

Sadly all good things must end; we kissed and hugged endlessly the morning after. We exchanged promises of love and communication means. With parting words of goodbye, I bestowed to her my favorite hoodie, baby blue highlights, and a dark background with the word "MCM" written on it; I interpreted it as Man Crush Monday (why? come on, look at me). I walked away, masking the tears while trying to maintain my composure, entering my house to inform my parents I was ready to leave.

Ten minutes later, we were driving out of the compound, and from the window of her flat, I could see Vanessa peeking. It was a cocktail of emotions, but there was something I couldn't seem to shake — the feelings of an uncertain future.

In school, I tried to communicate as best as possible, but juggling an engineering degree with long distance wasn't easy. My school didn't allow phone use, but every great love story has obstacles.

I was walking around school with a headphone and a love-stricken playlist. My grades suffered a little, but what's love without sacrifice? A sad sap who now saw other females as my fellow males.

Every Friday, by 4:30, I would race to my guardian's house for a one-hour call with her. That was a sacred time to me; I wouldn't miss it for the world.

At first, she was so excited, trying to catch me up on her life. Slowly but steadily, there was a change. Her voice didn't perk up when she spoke to me; it was more of a duty now. Cut her some slack, and I know it's been hard: we've been three months apart.

“There is this guy named Temi” she said with excitement, like a child that found a new toy.

My brain was still processing the “There is this guy” part, talkless of the name; you needed to see the look on my face; you would think I was suffering from a stroke.

Whoooo?, What?, Where?, How?

